
Shiite Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism

Martin Kramer delivered this address in a lecture series on fundamentalism at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, on or about November 21, 1990.

Let me say, first of all, that I was surprised that this series does not include a lecture on Islamic fundamentalism in general. Shiite fundamentalism is a variety of Islamic fundamentalism—that is, many of its collective memories and its basic raw material, the sacred texts, are common to all of Islam. The Quran is the source of reference to all Muslims, Shiites included. So, too, are the precedents set during the life of the Prophet. To the extent that these are the basis of Islamic law, there is also very little difference between Shiites and other Muslims, whom we call Sunni. Indeed, the very notion of a distinct Shiite fundamentalism would be anathema to most Shiites today. They would claim that the Islam which they wish to restore to its former glory is a universal Islam, not a peculiar variety of Islam.

Yet the fact remains that the division between Shiite and Sunni is the fundamental division of Islam, with very early origins in the history of Islam. Although Shiites share basic texts and fragments of historical memory with Sunnis, over time they have generated their own peculiar texts and, more importantly, their own way of remembering the past of Islam. In many respects, Shiite reading of sacred history has been precisely the opposite of the Sunni reading. If we assume that fundamentalism is an attempt to return to the sources, to the fundamentals, then we have to know something about the past—not the past “as it was,” as we might construct it through critical historiography, but the past as it is lived today, as it

is understood in the present by fundamentalists themselves. In this case, it is not sufficient to understand the broad Islamic past, its analogies and symbols. We must begin by inquiring what is unique and special to Shiism.

The usual way to describe Shiism's essence is to say that its adherents have always championed the claim of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and his male descendants, to lead the Muslim community. Shortly after the Prophet's death in 632, there formed around Ali a *shi'a*, or party, which put him forward as the most worthy successor to leadership of the community. The partisans of Ali also believed that he had been designated as successor by the Prophet himself, who earlier had given Fatima, his only daughter, to Ali in marriage.

But there were men of influence in the early Muslim community who favored other candidates. These caused Ali to be passed over three times for the position of caliph, or successor. When Ali finally did come to rule, in 656, they withheld their allegiance. And after Ali's murder in 661, the caliphate again reverted to men outside the Prophet's line. One of Ali's sons, Husayn, eventually put together a band of followers who championed his own claim to rule. But when this grandson of the Prophet made his bid for power in 680, he was massacred with his family and followers on the desolate plain of Karbala in Iraq. Only one of Husayn's sons survived; Husayn's own severed head was sent to the caliph in Damascus.

For the powers that were, the eradication of the small band at Karbala was little more than a routine counter-insurgency operation. But for Shiite legitimists, it was a searing trauma. The martyrdom at Karbala, commemorated annually by Shiites through the observance of a ten-day period of mourning, culminating in Ashura, vested Shiism with a deeply emotive strand of martyrdom. The sense of Islamic history as a litany of suffering came to pervade Shiism. The fate of the martyrs was all the more poignant for the tragic truth that they had been slain by fellow Muslims. To mourn them was also to grieve for Islam, whose adherents had gone astray before the body of the Prophet had gone cold.

Thus Islam divided, between the legitimist adherents of Ali's *shi'a* and those who claimed to walk only the Prophet's path, his *sunna* —that is, between Shiite and Sunni Islam. What began as a dissident position on the matter of succession in the seventh century blossomed in time into a full religious tradition,

distinguished from Sunni Islam by its own reading of theology and sacred history. The lines of Husayn's descendants came to be regarded as Imams—leaders of the spirit, carriers of the divine spark, infallible. Some were great teachers, and some even had amicable relations with the temporal rulers of Islam. But the Shiite tradition has it that none died a natural death. All were ultimately murdered (usually by poison) for posing a legitimist challenge to the rule of Sunni usurpers.

Soon Shiism itself split into fragments, large and small, which reflected every possible form of discontent in Islam. The varieties of Shiism readily provided spiritual succor to the many opponents of the reigning order—to those who felt dispossessed or excluded from the manifestly successful enterprise of Sunni Islam. We know really very little about the sociology of these early movements of rebellion, but the fact is that early Islamic history is strewn with Shiite uprisings. Most of these failed dismally, but there were brief periods when parts of the Muslim heartlands came under Shiite rule.

One radical branch of Shiism gained special renown for its mastery of revolutionary violence. The Ismailis emerged from a ninth-century divergence of Shiite opinion over the identity of the seventh Imam. They articulated a powerful utopian vision, and operated secretly to spread their message and undermine the existing Sunni order. In 969, an Ismaili movement seized Egypt and established the Fatimid state and caliphate (after Fatima, daughter of the Prophet).

In the year 1090, a breakaway faction of Ismailis established themselves in a fortress on a forbidding peak, in the Elburz range in Iran. From there, Persian-speaking emissaries went forth to the heterodox mountains of the northern Syrian coast, where they recruited a local Arabic-speaking following.

These zealots were the dreaded Assassins, whose notoriety spread even to medieval Europe. From their Persian headquarters and their Syrian bases, they orchestrated a brilliant campaign of assassination against the perceived enemies of Islam. They did not believe that preaching their truth sufficed; wrongdoers had to be terrorized into acknowledging that truth. The Assassins targeted Sunni Muslim rulers, ministers, officials, and divines, as well as prominent Crusaders. Their most famous assassinations claimed an Abbasid caliph and a Crusader king. The assassins were particularly effective because they needed no route of escape. They

set out to kill until they themselves were killed. The Assassins held out in their fortresses for almost two centuries, until they were extirpated by the Mongols in Iran, and by the Mamluks in Syria.

But in most times and in most places, Shiites plotted no revolutions and assassinated no enemies. They preferred a quiet existence as tolerated minorities within Sunni Muslim society. This was certainly the case for that form of Shiism which developed into what is known as Imami or Twelver Shiism. This branch of Shiism, which preferred a particular line of Imams who numbered twelve, eventually became the predominant school of Shiite Islam. The strategies of accommodation developed by these Shiites were far-reaching, and even included the deliberate concealment of their true beliefs. The pursuit of justice in the world was deferred to a point in eschatological time when the Twelfth Imam, having disappeared into occultation in 873, would return as messianic savior, as Mahdi, to do final justice.

These Shiites therefore deferred the obligation to wage jihad "in the path of God" to the day when the hidden Imam would reappear as redeemer and raise God's banners. In the meantime, they drew comfort and inspiration from commemorating the martyred Imams, and inflicted violence only upon themselves in penitential rites of self-flagellation. Historical circumstance transformed their grief for the Imam Husayn into a call for inner repentance rather than revolution. This strand of the Shiite tradition abjured politics, and disdained all temporal power as an infringement upon the authority of the hidden Imam. The pursuit of power in this world was deemed the heretical doctrine of extremist dissidents like the Assassins, and not the duty of true believers, who were enjoined to equate faith with patience, virtue with suffering. Shiism would undergo a number of subsequent transformations, but this first level of historical experience, lasting almost a millennium, was one of withdrawal from Islam's general presumption that man must implement God's plan on earth.

The geographic locus of this quietist Shiism in medieval times lay in Iraq, with extensions in Syria, central Iran and Khurasan. During the late medieval period, the Shiite centers in Iraq suffered the repeated degradations of war. However, Shiism was redeemed by the Safavids, a mystical order whose leaders established themselves as the uncontested rulers of Iran in the early 1500's. They immediately set about transforming Shiite Islam into state orthodoxy—something Shiism, in its quietest variety, had never been. The process of conversion was accomplished by persuasion and force, and Iran has remained firmly Shiite ever since.

This had two implications for Shiism. First, it established the centrality of Iran in the Shiite world. Shiism soon realigned around the Safavid realm, where the Shiite religious sciences flourished under the patronage of the state. Twelver Shiism came to be defined in large measure by its Iranian adherents, who today constitute about half of all Shiites. To the east and west of Iran there remained important Shiite populations, but these became, in a cultural sense, diaspora communities, usually deferring to Iranian Shiism in broad fields of theology, philosophy, and political thought. The cultural hegemony of Iran gave Twelver Shiism a sense of center which has ever eluded far-flung Sunni Islam.

The second implication was the rise of a clerical estate, formed by a powerful body of Shiite clerics, or ulama. They were closely bound to the ruling dynasty, and acquired irreversible trusteeship over vast properties. The influence of the religious scholars found doctrinal expression in the eighteenth-century triumph of certain ulama who claimed exceptional powers for Shiite expounders of Islamic law. These expounders, known as *mujtahids*, began to claim an authority unparalleled among Sunni ulama. It became obligatory for each Shiite to follow the rulings of a living *mujtahid*, and these rulings went far beyond the narrow realm of ritual and doctrine. As the Safavid state entered its decline, these ulama came to enjoy immense authority. They provided the stability which prevented political strife from turning into social disorder.

Until this point, the contacts between Shiism and the West had been rather limited. While Sunni Islam, and particularly the Ottoman empire, had a long history of contact and conflict with the West, Shiite Islam was geographically more remote. But beginning in the eighteenth century, Shiite Iran began to experience the direct effect of imperialism. The West was expanding: Iran faced the military imperialism of neighboring Russia and the commercial imperialism of Western Europe. The Qajar state could resist neither, despite the efforts of reforming and modernizing shahs. Ineffective as these reforms were in staving off foreign control, they quite effectively undermined the standing of the ulama. As foreigners staked ever larger claims to Iran's resources and territories, certain ulama gave their support to movements of resistance, such as the Tobacco Protest which began in 1891, and the Constitutional Revolution which began in 1905.

From the outset, then, it was the impact of Western imperialism which had the effect of mobilizing traditional religion. Yet this was not yet fundamentalism, for the old tradition was still alive and vital; it did not yet have to be rediscovered by returning to texts

and reinterpreting them. In particular, the Shiite clergy continued to regard government through the same perspective as the previous millennium. Their interpretation of doctrine still led them to disdain government as a greater or lesser usurpation of God's authority. The clergy, by their remonstrations, might lessen the evil effects of temporal government. But they would not take an active part in it.

In 1921, a military strongman emerged as savior of Iran. Reza Khan (later, Reza Shah) seized power from the tottering Qajars, and set Iran on an accelerated course of Westernization. The purpose of Reza Shah's policy was to modernize Iran and so guarantee its independence. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah, went still further, by seeking to transform Iran into the region's leading military and industrial power. Both of them hacked away at the remaining authority of the Shiite clergy, whom they regarded as obscurantists and obstacles to progress. The state nationalized religious endowments and harassed outspoken ulama. Some clergy, aligned with certain traditional classes of the population, resisted this. One thinks of the Feda'iyan-e Eslam movement of the 1950's, which also involved itself in assassination and terror. But by this time, the regime had succeeded in pushing Islam to the margins.

I have spoken a good deal here about Iran. But this was only half the Shiite experience. There remained important groups of Shiites to the north, south, east and west of Iran. It should be recalled that these Shiites remained under Sunni rule, and maintained the perspective of persecuted minorities. Many of these Shiites avoided persecution by seeking refuge in remote geographic areas—in Jabal Amil (South Lebanon), in the marshy south of Iraq, in the high mountains of Afghanistan. This isolation defended Shiites against Sunni persecution.

But it also worked to their disadvantage, once the region was swept by successive waves of modernization. Until modern times, there was little difference in the material culture of Sunnis and Shiites in these lands. But change, despite its dislocations, still raised the material level of life in the cities with their predominantly Sunni populations. Shiites in turn began to leave their redoubts in pursuit of material betterment and flowed into cities in every greater numbers. Poor Shiite neighborhoods grew up around cities such as Beirut, Baghdad, and Kabul. There it became painfully obvious to Shiites that the religious stigma they had long borne had been transformed into the most glaring social and economic disadvantages. A sense of deprivation among these

Shiites provided much fertile ground for ideologies of political dissent. But at first, the ideologies of the Left enjoyed a privileged standing, because the young associated their own Shiism with social backwardness and passivity. They sought some basis for assimilation into the mainstream of Islam, and an ideology of activism. Shiism provided neither.

Both in Iran and the Shiite diaspora, then, the Shiite tradition was under heavy assault. On the broadest level, we have to acknowledge the disorienting impact of the West, which has been a factor for Islamic fundamentalism generally. In the Shiite instance, this sense of grievance was heightened, in at least half the Shiite world, by a kind of internal oppression, of Shiite by Sunni. But why did the reaction to this oppression take a fundamentalist form? What happened to absolutely overturn the doctrines of Shiism with such suddenness and violence? What occurred to produce in Iran an *Islamic* revolution, and in the wider Shiite world a phenomenon like Hizballah, the Party of God? How was it that Shiism was transformed, from a quietest tradition to a theology of liberation?

Like all fundamentalisms, Shiite fundamentalism began with the reinterpretation of texts. Emmanuel Sivan has shown how, for Sunni fundamentalism, this reinterpretation occurred under the immense pressure of Egyptian and Syrian prisons. In the case of Shiism, a comparable degree of creative pressure was achieved in the Shiite shrine cities of Iraq. In these shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, around the tombs of the imams, the aspiring Shiite clergy from throughout the Islamic world came to learn and teach. There they realized the extent of the crisis which faced Islam in general, and Shiism in particular. The younger generation had turned away, or was being turned away. It was embracing foreign ideologies and ways. The clergy, although respected, were increasingly regarded as too other-worldly. Although they stood against cultural subservience to the West, they did so as obscurantists. They had no answer to the crisis, except to intone the tradition.

A group of young clerics in Najaf responded by going back to texts, and reading them in an intentionally deviant sense—by deviant, I mean deviating from what had been a certain consensus of interpretation. The purpose was to make Shiism again relevant, to reinvigorate it, to refashion it as a theology of liberation.

Let me enumerate some of these radical reinterpretations. The most important was the reinterpretation of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn at Karbala. The tradition had regarded this martyrdom in

ways almost comparable to the martyrdom of Christ: the death of this pure and sinless saint was meant to remind all men of their individual sinfulness, of individual guilt. He did not seek to harm others or overturn the existing order. He sought merely to die a death which would inspire repentance in man. The Imam Husayn was mourned by the infliction of punishment on the self, by an internalization of violence.

This understanding of martyrdom had done good service to oppressed Shiite minorities which sought ways to give meaning to their suffering, and did not have the means to end it. But it hardly appealed to a young generation which strongly felt the need to resist oppression, and which located all guilt with the oppressor. In the radical new interpretation, the Imam Husayn emerged as a modern revolutionary, leading the struggle of the oppressed against impossible odds—as a kind of Muslim Che Guevara. He was very much interested in righting wrong in this world, very much concerned with power and thwarting the enemies of Islam. He was no longer to be mourned, but to be emulated.

The second radical reinterpretation concerned the role of the ulama—those learned in Shiite law. The traditional view held that human history had gone so far astray that only God could right it, that all government was corrupt, and that true men of God kept their distance from rulers and their palaces. The Messiah would eventually right all wrongs; it remained to the ulama to keep alive the pure flame, so that man might always know the true way. But the reinterpreters, going back to a particular text, suddenly announced that this traditional interpretation had not only been flawed, but that God had intended exactly the opposite: that the clerics themselves should rule, that they should struggle to implement God's law here and now, that they should leave their dry books and lead the people to anti-imperialist revolution and justice.

There were other major reinterpretations, but these two were the most important. The first—the role of the Imam Husayn—was meant to force the common believer rethink the premises of Shiism, for it involved the radical reinterpretation of Shiism's most familiar symbols. The second was meant to force the clerics themselves to rethink their attitude to the temporal world, and take up the responsibility of preaching radical change, even revolution, and then taking up the responsibility of government.

Around these two ideas, a growing group of clerics—from Iran and elsewhere in the Shiite universe—began to engage in wholesale reinterpretation of doctrine, spinning out theoretical models of Islamic government and Islamic economics. Concepts of Islamic government reached their furthest refinement after the arrival in Najaf in 1965 of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who spent fourteen years of exile in Najaf and there formulated his intellectual case for Islamic government. The principles of Islamic economics reached their fullest articulation at about the same time in the teachings of an Iraqi Shiite theoretician, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.

At the time of formulation, these ideas were so remote from implementation that they could only be described as highly theoretical—like pure research in physics, for which no one could imagine any practical application. But the radical reinterpretations of Shiism had an unexpected power. Timing was all-important. A generation earlier, neither the clerics nor the masses would have accepted such a radical reinterpretation of their political duty, because the old tradition still lived within them. They would have marked such a radical reinterpretation as a heresy.

But a generation later, after still more relentless Westernization, the symbolism of the Imam Husayn might have been completely lost on younger people, whose distance from the tradition would have doubled, or tripled, or more. In other words, the reinterpretation came at a moment when people had forgotten enough of their own tradition to accept its radical reinterpretation as legitimate, but remembered enough of their own tradition to respond emotionally to its symbols. This, of course, is the dynamic of what is called “retraditionalization”—the reinventing of tradition—which is at the root of any fundamentalism.

Nor can we overlook the immensely complex social, political, economic, and psychological circumstances which combined to amplify this practically inaudible preaching into a roar. We are only at the beginning of such research. My present work on the Lebanese Hizballah is one such study—a minute examination of a fragment of the phenomenon, which has taken me even to the level of research of individual martyrs and clerics. At this level, a plethora of motivations are at work, not all of them what we might call ideological or religious.

I will confess that the more I work on this level, the less useful I find the broad category of Shiism as an analytical tool. And yet the symbols of Shiism are everywhere in evidence—not just in the speeches of clerics, but in the slogans on headbands, and in the

texts of the last will and testaments of martyred fighters. Along with all kinds of motives and desires, these people also carry within their heads an idealized and powerful vision of the past—a past they would restore. The reconstruction of that past will always have a place in the study of fundamentalism, even if we move on to more detailed sociological studies.

The historical moment of Shiite fundamentalism may have passed—defeated by its enemies in the Gulf war, and by its friends in the attempt to implement an Islamic Republic in Iran. Shiism may again be on the verge of a reinterpretation, one less optimistic about the ability of man to alter his fate. Shiism may be turned upside down again. But the achievements of Shiite revolution and terror in our time stand as evidence that no religious tradition is so other-worldly, that it cannot be reworked to inspire violence and self-sacrifice. But perhaps this tells you something you already have concluded: that no religious tradition is beyond fundamentalism.